

Finding and losing your selves in the archive: some reflections on 56a Infoshop



Neil Transpontine, March 2023

I have been coming to the 56a Infoshop sporadically since it opened in 1991 to read, chat, plot, drink, sometimes even play music and to delve into its archive of zines, papers and pamphlets – most of them from the 1980s onwards but with some earlier material. What draws people to this or any archive? Is it just remembrance of things past - our own past or our predecessors'? How does yesterday's news relate to today or tomorrow?

For me personally a future facing politics and the fascination with history have always gone hand-in-hand. The radical historian Raphael Samuel wrote in 'Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture' (2012) of a "resurrectionism" aiming to "to give a voice to the voiceless and speak to the fallen dead". This is something he associates with historians like E.P. Thompson who famously wrote in 'The Making of the English Working Class' (1965) of his wish "to rescue the poor stockinger, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'Utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity" (1). If we pay attention and seek to amplify marginalised voices in the present, shouldn't we be doing the same for those of the past?

There's something too about finding inspiring ancestors. Our imagined communities of resistance and hope can extend in time as well as space to include those who trod these ways before us. The dead may not attend our meetings but their lives and words can continue to operate and have effect in the living world. Beyond that, as Walter Benjamin argued in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940), creating a better future is partly an act of redemption and restoration "in the name of generations of the downtrodden" who preceded us. In the meantime he imagines the Angel of History watching the ongoing "catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet". Amongst this wreckage we might find the documents that constitute the archive.

The archive at 56a Infoshop was not created as a historical resource. The international infoshop movement which inspired it was about creating spaces for the circulation of information and ideas about current movements. Over time the contemporary materials that were collected in its reading space have aged and more or less accidentally become an archive that people explore to find out about things that happened in the past. From the ocean of previous radical efforts there has been a sedimentation into geological levels preserving the fossilised remains of many strange and beautiful creatures. From these dusty remnants - or maybe their digitized shadows - the historians of the future will reconstruct epic narratives of social movements, their successes and failures.



There are folk tale riddles where the questor must first ask the right question in order to find the treasure. The same applies to what questions we ask of the archive. The people who published much of the material at 56a often wanted to express a particular perspective on the world and to encourage others to join in their efforts. I tend to be less interested in their exact political viewpoints than in what some might see as ephemera, the day to day details of the movements' social and cultural life. For this reason I am particularly drawn to zines with news round ups, calendars and listings of events.

121 CENTRE

• **121 @ CENTRE** 121 Railton Road, London SE24. 274 6655 for the following:

BOOKSHOP Monday-Saturday 12 noon to 4pm. Anarchist books, mags, badges, posters etc.

BRIXTON SQUATTERS AID Sunday 3-5pm. Help and advice for squatters.

SQUATTERS CAFE Sunday 5-8pm. Cheap vegetarian/vegan nosh.

WOMAN'S CAFE Saturday 6pm. Usually ring first to be sure.

121 CLUB Friday Feb 27 and on the last Friday of every month: 11pm till late. Live bands, cafe, disco, subversive ranting.

121 CABARET NIGHT Thursday Feb 12 8pm. Live acts, comics, poets, instrumental music—all artists welcome. Superb cafe, refreshment and disco.

SQUATTERS LIBRARY Book swaps with a wide choice at 119 Elm Park Rd.

ANARCHIST VIDEO CLUB In the midst of compiling a new catalogue, out soon. We hope to have regular showings with other video groups e.g. Despite TV Arriarres. Phone for more details.

CROWBAR MAGAZINE Now preparing 46th issue. Help and volunteers needed for new collective. Enquire at 121.

SOUTH LONDON DAM Have meetings every two weeks. They are the British section of the I.W.A and are anarcho-syndicalists. New members welcome.

PUBLIC MEETINGS To be announced shortly.

All the above activities/events are run by volunteers and we need more urgently, especially for the cafe. Meetings are on the second Sunday of the month at 6pm. Ring first to confirm.

Sometimes from the perspective of my South London blog Transpontine I am interested in the hyperlocal, exactly where did events take place? It fascinates me for instance that a Camberwell pub where I used to go dancing in the 1990s (the Redstar) was a well-known gay pub in the 1970s and 80s (the Father Redcap) and a radical meeting place for the National Union of the Working Classes way back the 1830s (2). More recently it has been a Nigerian nightclub, Planet Nollywood. I feel the whole story of London could be told through that one pub, and the same could be said of many other places.

My other blog, History is Made at Night, is focused (very) loosely on 'the politics of musicking and dancing' so I am always interested in traces of parties, benefit gigs and festivals in the archive. This listing for the anarchist 121 Centre in Brixton from February 1987 for instance includes caffs, cabaret nights and a monthly club night with 'bands, café, disco, subversive ranting' (source: Monochrome, no.18).

Publications in 56a with good radical listings include The Leveller (1976-82), Monochrome (80s successor to The Leveller), Schnews (1994-2014) and of course Contraflow (1992-98) which started out as the 56a Info Shop

Bulletin in 1991 and which I was involved in early on. There were also a number of local zines in 1980s/90s linked to the Free Information Network, associated initially with the free festival movement but expanding into wider radical/counter culture concerns. Probably the most substantial was Guilfin (1989-1999), published from Guildford but with listings covering much of the south of England. Less a listings of things to come and more a

documentation of things that were happening, the central Scotland-based Counter Information (1984-2002) was important for its scope and regularity. The 1970s London-based People's News Service published more than 150 issues, none in 56a archive as far as I know but a couple online at archive.org.

A personal favourite of mine was the shortlived Autognome (1989-1991), put out by people previously involved in various initiatives including London FIN and the scurrilous Brixton anarchist squatters zine Crowbar.

DEMO
With a little help from their Moscow friends,
the Love Generation learns to hate.

march

14 Meeting with Ross Galbraith, sacked from Cranby Plastics in Leicester for refusing to work on an order for South Africa +ANC/SACTU/AAM speakers ...and a cricketer, 7.30-9.30 Hackney Town Hall. Mare St. EB.

17 ST PATRICKS DAY MARCH FOR JUSTICE. 12pm Whittington Park, N15 Archway Tube. Organised by the Irish in Britain Representation Group. Free the Birmingham 6, Winchester 3, Nick Mullen and Martin Foran.

Anti Poll Tax Benefit at City Poly, Whitechapel. 3/4, Magic Bastards, Kill the Boss.

3rd Man+Rubella Ballet at the Bogwater Club.

20 SPRING EQUINOX Stonehenge.

21 Angelic Upstarts/the Beggars at Sir George Robey, Finsbury Park.

22 Glassknobs+Amersham Arms, New Cross.

Africanheadcharge/Rhythmites. Boston Arms, Tuffnell Park.

24 10th Anniversary of shooting of Archbishop Romero in El Salvador. Glassknobs+Last Gasp play El Salvador solidarity benefit at the Old White Horse, Brixton Rd.

26 ANTI-APARTHEID MARCH. Noon at Hyde Park to Trafalgar Square for final trashing of SA Embassy.

28 UK Subs/Decadent Few, Sir George Robey.

31 VERY BIG ANTI POLL TAX MARCH. 12 noon Kennington Park. March to ..wait for it ..Trafalgar Square. Contact 533 5551. If non-payment is good enough for the queen its good enough for her loyal subjects.

Autognome correctly predicts the 'very big Anti Poll Tax March' on 31 March 1990. Lots of punk gigs too and a detournement of right wing author Richard Allen's novel 'Demo'— the Love Generation learns to hate'

At the time I was most involved in these kind of zines I was very taken with the autonomist notion of the circulation of struggles being facilitated by the circulation of (counter) information. In a sense the listings/news zine not only documented but helped create or maybe curate the sense of a movement. By bringing together news from disparate scenes and groups an implicit argument was being made about there being commonalities and the possibility of connection and cooperation. Editorial decisions about what to include or not set some kind of boundaries around what was seen as at least potentially part of the movement or perhaps as it was theorised in the noughties "a movement of movements".

Sometimes the fact of different activities being written about in the same pages may though create a misleading sense of unity. When I look back through listings which include things I was involved in I am reminded of bitter disputes: sometimes serious political disagreements, sometimes interpersonal feuds, often the latter masquerading as the former. The long list of different 'Movements', 'Action Groups' 'Campaigns' and 'Parties' can look impressive until you reflect that many of them had very small numbers of activists and until you wonder why they needed so many separate groups in the first place.

But there are points of connection as well as division. If we pay close attention in the archive we might notice key elements of radical infrastructure over time: places, print shops, bookshops, hubs of activity, of which of course 56a is one. Another was the Union



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Place Resource Centre in Camberwell. A workers co-operative in a period in which funding was available from left wing Councils, they taught 'local community groups and campaigns to plan, design and print their own publicity, posters, leaflets, newsletters, exhibitions etc'. Opening initially as a squat in 1974, it survived for twenty years despite being denounced in

Parliament by a Conservative MP for helping groups including "Librarians Against the Cuts, Vegetarians against Nazism, the Ad Hoc Committee Against the Police, [and] the Red Poster Collective" and a fascist attempt to burn it down in the following year (1980).

Look out for products of other London radical printers like Blackrose Press and Calverts (3) or traces of the Roneo Alcatel 9000 digital stencil printer at 121. Notice too some of the common addresses used by various groups and zines. 121 Railton Road comes up a lot, as does 2a St Pauls Road N1 used as office space for Advisory Service for Squatters, Islington Gutter Press and other groups. Like Union Place these were targets of presumed far right arson attacks, in 1993 and 1981 respectively. Another address you may come across in the archives is Clarendon Buildings (25 Horsell Road N5), where groups as diverse as Troops Out Movement, Women in Prison, Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Science for People, History Workshop and the Conference of Socialist Economists had office space in the 1980s/90s.

For an example of how a single artefact in the archive relates to this broader radical eco system let's dive into the box marked 'Women's – Bad Attitude' where we will find copies of the radical women's newspaper and some wonderful ephemera including letters

announcing both its launch in 1992 and its demise in 1997 'still for the overthrow of civilization as we know it'.



Bad Attitude had an office on the top floor of 121 which it shared with Contraflow, previously used by Black Flag among others. It grew on the earlier experience of collective members with other feminist publications including Outwrite, Shocking Pink and Feminaxe. It was distributed by Central Books, which started out distributing Communist Party publications in the 1930s. And collective members used the typesetter at Leveller Graphics (52 Acre Lane SW2).

Appeal hits £1500

Sponsors so far include :-

Tony Benn; Sheila Rowbotham; The Specials; The Gang of Four; Bruce Kent; Ruth Lister; Edward Upward; Ken Livingstone; Edward Bond; Peter Kennard; Czech Conroy; Roland Jeffery; George Melly; David Hare; Denis Skinner; Peter Hain; The Mistakes; Christopher Hill; Michelene Wandor; Alien Kulture; Stuart Christie; Richard Woolley; Gerry Adams; Lynne Segal; Frank Allaun; Stephen Rose; Leon Rosselson; Sally Potter; Tony Smythe; Bryony Lavery; Russell Profit; Hilary Wainwright; Au Pairs; Fenner Brockway; Anna Coote; Judith Williamson; Michele Barrett; David Yip; Mike Prior; Alison Fell; Zoe Fairbairns; Time Out NUJ Chapel; Julie Christie.

But how did the latter come about? Leveller Graphics started out with the independent socialist magazine of the same name, but when this closed in 1982 the typesetting continued, until 1992. In 1981 Leveller magazine had launched an appeal to raise funds to 'buy a typesetter and set up our new offices in Brixton' (No. 60, 10/7/1981). Contributors to

the appeal included a who's who of post-punk and early 1980s radicalism – The Specials, Gang of Four and the Au Pairs; historians Sheila Rowbotham and Christopher Hill; anarchist Stuart Christie and Irish Republican leader Gerry Adams. Fenner Brockway (1888-1988) is there too, jailed in 1916 for opposing the First World War. So in a sense a foundation of nearly a century of radicalism helped create the conditions for this 90s feminist paper.

The limits of the archive

Documents in the archive are an important source. But of course texts contain only traces of the living breathing arguing laughing crying subjects that produced them. There is evidence of the creators not only in the words on the page but in the material objects laid out, printed, folded and stuffed into envelopes (with the more DIY zines, tasks undertaken by the same person or small group of people). We don't though see the social world and its interactions from which the document has emerged.

When you encounter something that you were involved in producing it sparks recollections of the circumstances of its production that exceed the written content. For instance when I was looking through an issue of Contraflow recently it set me off on a stream of associations: memories of cold meetings at 121, using the internet for the first time (4), and whatever happened to Irene the enthusiastic Contraflowist from Germany who lived for a while in a changing room in the squatted Brockwell Park Lido, last time I saw her was in Heaven nightclub showing a film about the Claremont Road anti-M11 protest at the Megatripolis night etc etc..



The archive presents us with a series of separate objects, sometimes it is clear how objects relate to each other as part of a common movement, but often the connections between them are less obvious. This is particularly the case with radical movements characterised by anonymity and pseudonyms, where the paths traced by individuals that connect seemingly disparate scenes are not always visible. Popular cultural history tends to divide the past up into discrete sub cultures, movements, fashions, generations as if these don't bleed into each other, but our life stories tell a different story.

At 56a I can find traces of my previous selves and writings scattered between various boxes marked 'art and politics- autonomous astronauts', 'left communist UK', 'local history' and quite a few more. I sometimes wonder what it would look like if you physically connected all these boxes with a different colour thread for each individual involved. A hot mess but one that would defy any easy categorisation.

On becoming historic

There is some ambivalence about things you were involved in becoming the subject of historical enquiry. Some melancholy about the passing of time and the loss that comes with it. Some pride that some of it continues to resonate, with somebody at least. Some resistance to the mythologising of the recent past - or what feels like recent to you. Overlooking the contradictions and limitations of past movements can be demobilising in the present - "Measuring ourselves against the imagined actions of our semi-mythical ancestors, we can end up agonising about not being able to match their numbers let alone their deeds, lost in a daze of radical nostalgia for when times were apparently simpler and victories easier to grasp" (5) . Talking to the 'walking archives' of people who were actually present in past moments can help round out the picture of what it was really like, though oral history is certainly not infallible either. People's memories fail, or may be coloured by later changes of heart.

Let us not dwell for too long in the past, what is happening now is often more exciting if only because the ending has not yet been written (although *pace* Benjamin the stories from the distant past also still await a proper ending). But let's sit for a while in this place which in gathering together disparate rebellious spirits I romantically picture as the archive of the multi-century Casbah imagined by William Burroughs in 'Cities of the Red Night' (1981): "Criminals and outcasts of many times and places are found here".

In any event, "A turn toward the archive is not a turn toward the past but rather an essential way of understanding and imagining other ways to live in the present". The archive can restore "not history itself but rather the ability to understand the conditions of our everyday lives longitudinally and, more important, the conviction that we might, once again, be agents of change in time and history" (Kat Eichorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 2013).

Notes:

- (1) Joanna Southcott (1750-1814) preached her millenarian prophecies at a chapel at the Elephant and Castle. A similar sect later in the 19th century were known as the Walworth Jumpers on account of their ecstatic dancing in a local railway arch.
- (2) See Past Tense (2008), 'Rare doings at Camberwell'.
- (3) Jessica Baines (2013) *Democratising Print? The Field and Practices of Radical and Community Printshops in Britain 1968-98*.
- (4) Neil Transpontine, *Archaeology of the Radical Internet: Reflections on the Early European Counter Network in the Age of 'Networked Social Movements'*, Datacide, 2015.
- (5) Neil Transpontine, *Lewisham 77: Myth and anti-fascist history*, Datacide 2018.

A few things I contributed to that may be found within the archive...

